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LITERATURE IN THE ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL) PROGRAM, PROBLEMS OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURE. (TITLE SUPPLIED).

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THE SITUATIONS ENCOUNTERED AND THE METHODOLOGY AND MATERIALS EMPLOYED IN TEACHING ENGLISH LITERATURE TO COLLEGE-LEVEL FOREIGN STUDENTS ARE DISCUSSED. DANGERS INHERENT IN SIMPLIFYING ENGLISH LITERATURE, AS WELL AS DIFFICULTIES ARISING FROM LITERARY STYLES TOO COLLOQUIAL OR ARCHAIC FOR NONNATIVE SPEAKERS, ARE POINTED OUT. NONCOMPREHENSION OF LITERATURE WHICH IN THE MAIN DERIVES FROM IGNORANCE OR MISUNDERSTANDING OF THE CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF THE LITERATURE MAY BE LESSENED BY MORE CAREFUL SELECTION OF READING PIECES. PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR INTRODUCING A NEW SHORT POEM IN AN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL) CLASS INCLUDE A LEXICAL EXPLICATION FIRST AND PRESENTATION AFTERWARDS. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE ESL SECTION OF THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH (HOUSTON, NOVEMBER 1966). (AMM)

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LITERATURE IN THE ESL PROGRAM

PROBLEMS OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

John F. Povey

One of the characteristic aspects of the direct method of language teaching has been an emphasis upon the elementary levels of language learning.* The very success of the Michigan methods--of pattern practice and oral drills--at this level, has led to an exaggerated assumption that the outstanding problems of language teaching have been solved. After the serious difficulties of the initial presentation the rest is supposed to be relatively plain sailing. It has been believed (or at least tacitly agreed on the grounds of economy in class organization) that the student properly trained during his initial or remedial year of learning in an American ESL Program can then be merged into the English courses designed for native-speakers; the American Freshmen. The time, it is cheerfully assumed in spite of all the mountainous evidence to the contrary, will soon arrive, when the foreign students' knowledge of English syntax is sufficiently extensive that, with a good dictionary for lexical problems and a little outside assistance from kindly landladies a non-native speaker can comfortably participate in the regular departmental classes in English literature. This practice has meant that to date all literature that a foreign student discovers is derived from a dimly comprehended survey that is often of a length that makes it an onerous reading load for even the native speakers. Many teachers reviewing the first midterm blue books that result from this drastic arrangement have been dismayed to discover what a thin veneer of English comprehension has been created by even the most rigorous and professional of ESL courses.

It has been said that one way to teach a child to swim is to cast him into the deep end of a swimming pool and allow luck and instinct to take over. The statistics on drowning from this method of training are not published. Thrusting an inadequately prepared foreign student into a class for native speakers is equally drastic and evidence of the educational drowning that results from this immersion is common upon our campuses. The devastating results are partly concealed by the extraordinary industry of the foreign student and the quantity of disguised assistance he receives from well intended Americans properly disturbed by the visitors' natural distress.

Clearly what is needed is a bridge to link the gap between the early stages of language learning and the participation in the ordinary classes at the junior level of the university. It can be argued that ideally all English courses for non-native speakers should be

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AL 000 327

specifically designed for their needs and abilities; a series of parallel classes. That would be a very expensive luxury and I think that we can allow the occasional advanced students from abroad who seek their PhD in English to make their own quietus with the American academic system. Where, I believe, we should be more immediately concerned, is with the student, showing some competence and fluency in English who wishes to begin his initial (and often terminal) year's study of English literature.

The use of that term 'literature' begs a number of questions from the very beginning. There appears to be a fundamental dichotomy between the works we decide are suitable from the standpoint of linguistic comprehensibility and those which from our own reading we feel that the student ought to be introduced to--the great classics of our literature. This division of choice is best exemplified by one of the greatest of all American novels Huck Finn. Is there any book more central to the American literary tradition; more exactly at the heart of American sentiment? Yet could there be a book more difficult in its language? Even I who have the advantage to be an English-speaking foreigner, find parts of its dialog all but incomprehensible! Can this gap between suitability for language teaching and quality as literature be reconciled or bridged at all?

As a literature man myself I darkly suspect that linguists might be inclined to declare that this is an entirely artificial problem. If the emphasis falls on the development of reading in the abstract as it were, without consideration of the calibre of the content, they would certainly be right. From the linguists' point of view there are a number of elementary readers that serve the reading need of the foreign student. These texts have precisely calculated and planned vocabularies; their syntax is exactly ordered and selected for its range in the hierarchy of linguistic difficulty. Well and good. But what has this to do with English literature? Is literature any reading material or, in fact, is something very different involved? At this point we should consider the value of the simplified versions of the classics which are often advocated. Again they serve a purpose but their comprehensibility can be obtained in many cases only at the cost of the elimination of much that is essential to the work. With a controlled vocabulary and syntax usually the first things that have to go are the slang, the unusual colourful words, the idiomatic conversations. The very things which make the quality and tone of an individualist style are eliminated for a bland choice of words that fit to some preconceived list of commonly used terms. The piece is inevitably robbed of the very things that make it unique.

There have been many attempts to undertake such simplification. A recent ambitious project has been developed by Professor James Ney at the English Language Center of Michigan State University. He has chosen to simplify some of the work of Mark Twain. We would like a foreign student to become acquainted with the writing of America's

most famous humourist. Perhaps without simplification, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog" would remain incomprehensible. It could be argued that such a 'story' has a validity even if it has lost that additional humour that comes from Mark Twain's style as a Western raconteur. But we should, I reiterate, in using such an adaptation, be very aware of what we are doing and why we are doing it. If we do not constantly remind ourselves of the motives for our alterations, and the very necessary limitations such changes impose, we will fall into the deplorable trap of assuming that the story is the work. That way lie "classic comics" in all their pernicious vulgarity. Such papers illustrate Macbeth for example and Lady Macbeth's incisive and angry line against her husband, "Infirm of purpose, give me the daggers," comes out in the little bubble of speech as "You're chicken. I'll do it."

I believe it is possible to exaggerate the linguistic difficulties of a piece. One knows from experience how much comprehension can be gained from attempting to read a short story in French for example, even though one's lexical knowledge is sadly limited. A dictionary can do wonders as many an advanced student has proved as he demonstrates what is optimistically called "a reading knowledge" of a language for his doctoral requirements. It is true, it goes without saying, that for a foreign student the question of language must be first and foremost in our mind in the selection of appropriate items. One cannot make any beginning at all unless there is a considerable measure of initial comprehension. But this is surely so for the choice of reading in any other educational circumstances whatever the level, whether we are picking a Dick and Jane reader for tinies or wondering whether freshmen students can be expected to comprehend Chaucer in the original Middle English. Arguments on this point add nothing new.

My own concern is with a more subtle area of understanding; where there has been linguistic comprehension--at least in the narrowest sense of the word--and yet there remains a total ignorance of meaning. Here the fact that the vocabulary is known, the syntax within the student's experience does not automatically imply understanding. Robert Frost's poetry is a case in point. It looks so easy and at one level his prose-like, casual lines are simple. His meaning however is hard to come by. Where do you go after every word has been elucidated and comprehension has not resulted?

I believe, from some experience in this area of ESL teaching, that we have focused our attention too exclusively upon the language problem. This area of reading is fairly readily amenable to explication and simplification. In so doing we have overlooked--or at least under-rated--the discovery, that a far greater measure of non-comprehension of imaginative writing derives from a misunderstanding or ignorance of the whole cultural context out of which literature develops. The literature of a country IS that country. There has been no national grandeur without an attendant national literature. There is no more revealing evidence of a nation's individuality, its sense

of itself, and its world than the literature its writers have created. It is not in the history books nor in the studies of social scientists that a country will be revealed to an outsider but in its novels and poetry. We should bear this knowledge in mind when we come to make our selections for foreign student's study. Our desire to have a student know our language should lead towards the desire to have them understand something of the sentiments and beliefs that have been fostered in this country. Americans are modest and embarrassed about this subject. We are not concerned with that ugly word 'indoctrination' but the presentation of a way of life that we can reasonably hope the foreign student will appreciate and respect--or what do we imagine we have them in this country for? (Again to make that sort of remark I take safe refuge in my foreign and alien status!)

When we begin to move beyond the linguistic to the cultural aspects of literature there seems no end to our problem. Such difficulties are formidable enough even when we are not constricted by the limitations of the use of another language. The following lines of mysterious Australian jargon are English. A dictionary may yield us explanation of that slew of remarkable words or a rough meaning may be gleaned from the context.

> Once a jolly swagman camped by a billabong,
> Under the shade of a coolibah tree....

We know the language. We can obtain a meaning for the unknown words but does the resulting perception give us any true image if we do not share the social experience of a nation which includes wandering swagmen in its history? If we carried this argument to extremes of course we would have to assert that nothing outside our immediate context is comprehensible. That is obviously absurd. By that token any translation would be meaningless. Rather we can assert, hopefully, that all literature is capable of expanding the limitations of our imaginative comprehension. I merely wish to remind us all that there are underlying cultural assumptions inherent in most words and we must be cautiously aware of this likelihood. Even a dictionary will not necessarily provide the full evidence that the effect the writer desires to provoke is precisely that reaction that a foreign reader will derive from his words. Words that appear to have an almost exact one-for-one equivalent may prove to have very clear discrepancies across cultures. What do you imagine when you read such a word as 'house', 'road', 'field', 'school', 'family', 'mother'? What different concept does an African or an Asian student perceive? And words such as those above are comparatively simple compared with those abstract ones like 'democracy', 'freedom', 'death'.

One should recognize too, how deeply literature is located in the geograpic and meteorologic data of its national origin. What about all that youthful elation we assume is an inevitable concomitant of spring and what about that nostalgic sense of middle age that comes with golden September? How could we share either of these emotional

states if our own national temperature ranged little from 80 degrees fahrenheit throughout the year? The contrast between such assumptions in English literature and the tropic context in which it may be read has been well observed by Cecil Day Lewis, the contemporary English poet. Day Lewis was attempting to teach English literature in an Indian University when he was provoked into the following poem:

> And the skylark crying bird I never
> Routs parakeet, hornbill, kookaburra,
> While the nightingale puts on spurs
> To rip the guts from the decadent bulbul.
>
> Wee sleekit cowrin' timorous warthog,
> Tirra lirra by Kabul River
> The elm-tree bole is in tiny leaf but
> Not for long because of the termites.

(Day Lewis' experiences might be an appropriate moment to digress into an explanation of how the British teach their literature overseas. They have a series of utterly British set books. The students write a typically British exam set in Cambridge and graded there. Their resulting scripts consist primarily of incompetently memorized truisms of literary criticism gleaned from inferior local 'ponies'.)

The cultural problems become far more insoluble when one moves beyond the relatively measurable, visual differences of seasonal change into that vague and indefinable area of established moral assumptions and personal custom and behavior. I. A. Richards records an experience he had in China that revealed much to him about the problems of literature in a foreign context. He had been working through that classic Hardy novel Tess of the d'Urbeville's with his Chinese students. The last tragic scene you will recall is the execution of poor Tess when provoked to frenzy by despair she has committed murder. Hardy wants us to feel (and most Anglo readers do feel) a sense of pity and regret at the undeserved destruction that malignant and unjust fate has imposed upon the unhappy heroine. Moved with emotion at this termination Richards awaited his students' response. He was disconcerted to hear only a buzz of approval. Inquiring he learned that within the Chinese cultural morality there was no possibility of sympathy for unlucky Tess. There was only a satisfaction in the poetic justice of her end. Any girl who would in so undutiful a way go against her father's wishes deserved everything she got and hanging was an appropriate come-uppance!

I am sure that any experienced ESL teacher can supply many similar examples of misunderstanding. Scenes of husbands helping their wives with the washing-up, carefully contrived by the writer to show what goodhearted fellows their heroes are, convey to South American readers only evidence of a lack of manliness. Japanese claim to find the motivation of Hawthorne's heroes incomprehensible because they presuppose a Christian sense of guilt.

My own first serious attempt to confront this problem began when I attempted to teach The Gift of the Maji to a group of advanced

foreign students from the ESL program at UCLA. I had tried to select a suitable story. The Gift was in nice, clear, direct English. It touched upon the struggles of a young newly married couple in an urban setting so I hoped there might be some interest if not actual identification. It was not only a famous story by a major American writer but it was so well known as to have become virtually part of American culture. The student would have the happy familiarity of recognition if the plot were referred to in conversation. My motives were good. I did my best. The result was disaster. So obvious was it that I was not getting across to them that I asked them out of class to write for me a discussion of the issues in this story that they found difficult to understand.

The results of this exercise were amazing but must reflect only a single example of what must be constantly occurring in the minds of the students locked, as they are, in an entirely different cultural pattern. The difference in this present case was that I had ONLY ESL students. I was to some extent aware through my own training that there were going to be problems. I had less than twenty students and with that luxurious ratio I could approach the issue in a more individual way than any teacher could who was forced to race through extensive material in a basic survey of American literature in front of a large hall full of sophomores. Nevertheless, reading these papers was a revelation to me. I had no idea that there could be quite as many problems and such utterly unexpected ones too. Some students rejected the motivation of the story with outright disbelief. "Women buy presents for themselves at Xmas but I never heard of a wife buying her husband a present." Others were equally dubious but were polite enough to query rather than dismiss the facts. "Isn't it the man who buys something for his wife? And what she does for the man about the house, isn't that enough to show the honour of being owned by him?" Some found their national experience conflicted with the incidents. "A woman like Mme. Sophronie in the story wouldn't have a single client willing to sell her hair in my country, for a woman would be uncertain of what she might do with it." Others express incredulity after a desperate search for some analogy within their own cultures. "Without Christianity you cannot understand why the girl sold her hair to make money just for a present. There have been cases of Japanese women who have sold their hair to make money for living, in the old times, but I have not heard that someone sold her hair for just a present." One ranged his disbelief against his new experience of our amazing culture. "I cannot understand how a Xmas present is important to a Christian, though I know they cannot skip a Christmas." Some scorn the romance with firm rationalism. "If you are poor to spend money on a present is to throw your money into a ditch." One last student obviously digesting the impact of the wierd customs of this land is cautious but admits that almost anything may be possible here! "I know Christian traditions since I have been going to school but I didn't know that hair was so valuable until the third year of my stay at UCLA. Also I should add this comment that

everything is changing so one shouldn't be surprised to see a woman buy a present for a husband." I must not belabor the point further with more examples but what, I ask you, as I asked myself, is left of that tender-sweet little love story that gives us all such a cosy glow? Where does one begin the explanations that may clear up these wrong assumptions so casually made?

After so much introduction perhaps you await the omniscient solution that any speaker should offer in resolution of the difficulties he has propounded so rhetorically. If you are waiting for such a definitive answer I am certainly going to disappoint you. My own experiences, in fact, have caused me increasingly to evade the issue that I find most provocative and challenging--the introduction of the foreign student to 'literature' in the sense of a survey of the major works of this country in some sequence of chronology or theme. I still believe that this question, although I am prepared to shelve it temporarily in this most cowardly way, does remain to be tackled--(solved is perhaps too optimistic a verb). But one can shut the eye to the fact that a student may return to his country speaking fair English but never having been brought in contact with Nathanial Hawthorne or Herman Melville, he may, after all, be no worse off in that respect than a local engineering student. Accept this, and one can revert to that word used earlier, to the concept of a bridge. And then the question may be re-posed in what may seem an over-cautious and limited way. What can be done to lead the non-native speaker in the direction of his first experience of literature in English? How can one balance their urgent requirements of linguistic improvement with access to worthwhile reading?

Posed in this manner, the question can be met with some quite positive and, hopefully, worthwhile classroom suggestions.

Firstly it is clear that writing of the twentieth century is by far the most effective material for a number of reasons. It will be most comprehensible in both its language and in the ideas that concern it--or if these are not immediately familiar, at least they will be closer to those things we will wish to develop in the student. Being modern it will have the most useful and acceptable idioms and colloquialisms which will give a closer approximation to the natural verbal skills we are also endeavoring to impart than the more mannered styles of earlier periods. Such writing also valuably indicates the best style that they should emulate in their own writing. Have you ever faced the problem of correcting the style of an African student whose stylistic excesses have been carefully nurtured by being modelled on some of the more purple passages of Charles Dickens? Dickens is a set book in many African schools. The result in student's writing style should remind us that we are not, in our choice of texts, dealing with trivialities. Such novels have vitiated the writing style of an entire continent's educated class! Contemporary literature also permits a balance between the intensive reading done in class and the

further extensive home reading one will hope to encourage the more able student with his speedier reading capacity to undertake. Modern books do not get isolated in the mind as 'set books' but direct a student towards similar private reading for pleasure. Interest in, say, a Hemingway short story, and lead a student to further discovery of that author, his enjoyment enhanced by the biographical and background information he has derived from the classroom presentation.

Your choice is very wide but I must warn of the danger inherent in one's too easy assumption that what is of interest to us, is also, by extension, of equal interest to the foreign student. British examiners bravely breaking beyond the traditional text book limitations have offered things like the Captain Hornblower books. Their dictum that "Everyone likes a good sea yarn" is more questionable in, say, a Central African context besides any question of an ex-colonials' response to stories of British military heroism! In American writing we might consider for example whose side the foreign student will take in sympathy when we read to him of cowboys and indians!

How then, to be more immediately practical, when you have decided upon an appropriate piece of writing, do you teach it to the foreign student in you class? First comes the truism, get your classes as small as protest and appeal can make them so that you are not driven merely to lecturing at the masses. Lecturing as a teaching method is so much more reprehensible to the foreign student than to an American freshman, undesirable as even that is. It is so tempting. You have so much new information to convey to them. But there is probably an exactly negative ratio between the amount you talk and the amount a foreign student learns. It is essential to gain their participation however halting, however reluctant. They are so polite and look so earnestly attentive that you will not discover until the first horrifyingly revealing test, how little impact your witty and learned but, alas, too lengthy, speeches have had.

I would offer a further warning, from experience, about the use of various classroom devices; those audio-visual aids that so temptingly abound. Use them sparingly. Some illustrations as obviously helpful--slides of specific items or cut-out pictures to show a daffodil, a skyscraper or snow. But beware the lengthier film. So often such shows develop independently of classroom needs and take on their own purpose. Whatever private entertainment they may offer the student they are only valuable when they are precisely linked to the immediate classroom topic. One need simply remember that such devices are tools and that any tool is only useful when it is applied to a definite purpose. Our purpose is the teaching of literature.

In a similar way, records may appear very helpful in the presentation of poetry and plays and indeed they may be. But the advantages of the separate role playing in the drama may be offset by the difficulty of the varied voices and accents. One can too easily

overlook the extent to which the student adjusts his ear to his own teacher's voice. Your own careful readings of a poem may make more effective impact upon the students' understanding than those sonorous organ notes of Dylan Thomas' Welsh accent, no matter how impressed we may be with his interpretation. The teacher is so much closer to the class and can give especial clarity and emphasis to his reading in a way that the impartiality of the recorded voice does not permit.

Let me now suggest an appropriate lesson plan for an ESL class faced with a new short poem. This is probably our easiest task since the item is brief enough to be offered within the confines of a single class meeting.

From a knowledge of the background of the student--the linguistic and cultural sophistication of the class, you can estimate the complexity possible in your interpretation. Begin with some general comment on the setting of the poem and--if you must--on the life and times of the poet. But do keep this brief. This is not a formal literature class and the poem is the object of our attention, the poem itself not the background to its creation--or what has the New Criticism taught us all?

Explain the difficult words that they are going to encounter. Be aware that there are two types of vocabulary, words that you will expect them to learn with sufficient skill to handle in sentences and those words of which a recognition acquaintance will be enough. All the occasional 'poeticisms' fall into this latter group. Give the second type the minimal attention to permit comprehension. The former words can be treated like any other vocabulary extension. You can devise drills upon their usage until they have become part of the student's regular everyday vocabulary.

After this preparation read the poem through carefully aloud, as slowly and deliberately as some approximation to a natural speed allows. Do not stop along the way for exclamation upon its beauties nor elucidation of its difficulties. It is this reading that will give the poem any impact it is going to have upon the student, and no subsequent development will have much effect if it has been a flop at this stage. You will, I believe, be pleasantly surprized by the foreign student's reaction to poetry. They have not been inhibited in their appreciation by our Puritan assumption that poetry is suspect for the way it draws upon our emotions. Their response is usually open and genuine. That fact makes the order I indicate above the more important if we are to achieve our wishes in presenting a piece--lexical explication first, presentation afterwards. Any reversal of this order means that a poem is first launched into a sea of total incomprehension so that it can have no effect at all. Any explanations undertaken afterwards are simply picking over the corpse of what had been a vital, lively poem. Then it becomes nothing more than another prosaic excercise in comprehension.